

# Student Wellbeing in Educational Settings

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## Abstract

Ensuring that all our children and young people are of sound wellbeing in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is of growing importance in educational settings. This literature review explores a range of primary studies to examine the contributing factors to student wellbeing in an educational setting. Student wellbeing is becoming increasingly significant when assessing school effectiveness as wellbeing directly influences social, emotional, and behavioural outcomes, as well as academic achievement. The studies examined established that classroom settings are a major site for wellbeing development. Classrooms need to be safe, supportive, and respectful learning environments to foster high levels of student wellbeing. The studies examined identified that student wellbeing is influenced by the teachers own wellbeing. If teachers have a perceived lower wellbeing, this will have a flow on effect to students, negatively affecting their wellbeing. Furthermore, the studies have highlighted the impact teacher-student relationships have on student wellbeing. It is suggested that supportive teacher-student relationships promote and develop student wellbeing effectively. In summary, this literature review reflects the significance of creating teaching and learning environments that promote student wellbeing for future health.

**Keywords:** *Wellbeing, Student, Teacher Role, Teacher-Student Relationships, Classroom.*



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## Introduction

Across the world, education settings are key sites for providing teaching and learning experiences that aim to facilitate children's and young people's academic competencies. Traditionally, when assessing school effectiveness, it was only cognitive factors, such as academic achievement, that were taken into consideration ([Van Petegem, Aelterman, Van Keer, & Rosseel, 2007](#)). However, over the past decade the fascination for purely cognitive factors of school effectiveness has taken a progressive transformation. Education providers now have a responsibility and commitment to their students to provide teaching and learning experiences that facilitate student wellbeing.

Student wellbeing has become a significant factor when assessing school effectiveness because of the increasing number of students who display aggressive, non-compliant, and resistant behaviours in education settings ([Poulou, 2017](#)). These behaviours have resulted in problems with student discipline and classroom management ([Schonert-Reichl, 2017](#)). Furthermore, there is a persistent increase in the number of students who are experiencing mental and emotional disorders and these can have long term detrimental outcomes ([Kidger, Gunnell, Biddle, Campbell, & Donovan, 2009](#)). For this reason, student wellbeing

is a significant factor in how students learn, behave, and function within educational settings and communities, as well as an output factor when assessing school effectiveness. The role of education providers, especially that of teachers, has changed to providing students with wellbeing support, to the same level as academic support. Educational settings are moving away from asking who is the problem? to what is the problem? (Murray-Harvey, 2010).

The aim of this literature review is to examine a range of studies that have explored student wellbeing. In particular, unpacking wellbeing in educational settings, what the teacher's role is in promoting and developing student wellbeing, and subsequently how teacher-student relationships influence student wellbeing.

## Wellbeing

The wellbeing of students has become a vocalised concern within educational settings, however, there are inconsistencies about what student wellbeing is and includes. Initially, student wellbeing is considered an emotional state ([Holfve-Sabel, 2014](#); [Van Petegem et al., 2007](#)) that is influenced by multiple factors in and outside the classroom. This is a rather naïve view of student wellbeing, because students enter educational settings with non-cognitive aspects that affect their wellbeing (Murray-Harvey,



2010; [Van Petegem et al., 2007](#)). [Anderson and Graham \(2016\)](#) identified that students define their wellbeing in terms of being safe, happy, loved, respected, and healthy. Educational settings, therefore, must foster and develop more than emotional wellbeing to ensure they are educating their students to become productive future citizens ([Kidger et al., 2009](#); [Schonert-Reichl, 2017](#)). Student wellbeing must be recognised in educational settings as including students' emotional, social, physical, and mental states of being ([Anderson & Graham, 2016](#); [Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011](#); [Murray-Harvey & Slee, 2007](#)).

Students wellbeing fluctuates daily as it depends on whether their emotional, social, physical, and mental needs have been satisfied (van der Kaap-Deeder, Vansteenkiste, Soenens, & Mabbe, 2017). [Holfve-Sabel \(2014\)](#) state that student wellbeing was previously thought of as a family responsibility; however, [Anderson and Graham \(2016\)](#) argue that supporting student wellbeing is now a function of realising students' rights as human beings and part of all children's services. Therefore, education settings are now equally responsible for promoting student wellbeing ([Holfve-Sabel, 2014](#)). Educational settings should produce students who are proficient in core academic components, but who can also work well with others from diverse backgrounds in social and emotional ways, practice healthy behaviours, and be responsible and respectful ([Durlak et al., 2011](#)).

The classroom setting is a key site for promoting student wellbeing. Classrooms need to be safe, inclusive, respectful, and supportive learning environments ([Durlak et al., 2011](#); [Holfve-Sabel, 2014](#); [Murray-Harvey, 2010](#), [Schonert-Reichl, 2017](#)). [Anderson and Graham's \(2016\)](#) study further identifies that classrooms need to be tidy environments. [Murray-Harvey and Slee \(2007\)](#) and [Holfve-Sabel \(2014\)](#) communicate that classroom settings are the central location for students to build relationships with their teachers and their own peers. Many studies suggest that student wellbeing is best promoted in the classroom setting where there are positive, supportive, and collaborative relationships between teachers and students, and students and students ([Anderson & Graham, 2016](#); [Holfve-Sabel, 2014](#)). [Anderson and Graham \(2016\)](#) explain that these relationships encourage student responsibility and informed decision making, helping to provide a sense of belonging and positive self-esteem within students. Classroom settings must also foster student engagement, participation, meaning making, and motivation for the promotion of student wellbeing, which highlights the importance of how and why teachers choose certain course content ([Anderson & Graham, 2016](#); [Van Petegem et al., 2007](#)). In addition, within the classroom setting, student wellbeing can be fostered and developed through the proper identification of wellbeing, identification of problems, and the elimination of risk factors, such as the repeated negative reinforcement of gender, race, and sexual orientation ([Holfve-Sabel, 2014](#)).

Achieving student wellbeing in an educational setting is complex; however, it is essential for the development of the whole child (Martinez, 2016; [Poulou, 2017](#)). The development of the whole child includes social, emotional, and behavioural competencies, as well as academic components that each influence the wellbeing of students ([Durlak et al., 2011](#)). [Kidger et al. \(2009\)](#) and [Murray-Harvey and Slee \(2007\)](#) argue that

wellbeing and learning are interconnected; you cannot have one without the other. Wellbeing is central to learning: learning is central to wellbeing. [Holfve-Sabel's \(2014\)](#) study concluded that student wellbeing reflects the quality of education received. A range of studies discovered that student wellbeing is a key component to produce successful educational outcomes ([Murray-Harvey, 2010](#); [Van Petegem et al., 2007](#)) with [Anderson and Graham \(2016\)](#) concluding that students with higher wellbeing achieve greater academic success. Furthermore, [Anderson and Graham \(2016\)](#) state that students with higher wellbeing in the classroom setting also improve their sense of agency, communication, self-esteem, confidence, community engagement, self-fulfilment, better health status, and reduced exclusion from school. Educational settings are paramount to the promotion of student's wellbeing while at school and in the future.

## Teacher Role

It is long established that teachers can influence and make a difference to students' lives and contribute to their wellbeing. This can be fostered through developing the whole child so student wellbeing needs are respected and supported in a safe and responsive educational setting ([Holfve-Sabel, 2014](#); [Schonert-Reichl, 2017](#); [Van Petegem et al., 2007](#)). As a result, the role of a teacher is challenging and demanding with accountability measures, heavy workload, diverse range of students needs and behaviours, time constraints, and occupational stress ([Kidger et al., 2009](#); [Martinez, 2016](#); [Poulou, 2017](#)). [Kidger et al., \(2009\)](#) and [Schonert-Reichl \(2017\)](#) have identified these factors as reasons for teacher burnout, emotional exhaustion, lower job satisfaction, and low sense of accomplishment. Furthermore, they have been the main determinates in lowering teacher's wellbeing. [Schonert-Reichl \(2017\)](#) adds to this idea by identifying teachers own personal and professional emotional and social level of competence is associated with differing levels of teacher wellbeing. [Kidger et al., \(2009\)](#) believes that many teachers often have unmet wellbeing needs in educational settings that hinder their ability to then meet student wellbeing needs and be a positive role model. It is clear from the studies that there is flow on effect from teacher wellbeing to that of student wellbeing ([Kidger et al., 2009](#), [Schonert-Reichl, 2017](#)). Teacher wellbeing forms the basis for relationship building with students, and provides a psychologically secure learning focused classroom ([Poulou, 2017](#)). When teachers have lowered wellbeing they are unable to fully support and respond appropriately to their students' needs, and therefore, they are unable to do their job effectively ([Kidger et al., 2009](#)). The flow on effect of this is evident in student wellbeing as there are often increased difficulties within the classroom. [Kidger et al., \(2009\)](#) and [Schonert-Reichl \(2017\)](#) identified such difficulties as emotional distress in both students and teachers, and students exhibiting higher levels of externalising problems, interpersonal problems, and internalising problems ([Kidger et al., 2009](#); [Schonert-Reichl, 2017](#)). Teachers with lower wellbeing need to act and make a conscious effort to receive support and training to develop their emotional and social abilities and skills so they can become effective and resilient teachers ([Poulou, 2017](#)).

The need for teachers to receive support to allow them to develop their own and student wellbeing has been highlighted in

research. [Kidger et al., \(2009\)](#) established that teachers have previously ignored addressing student wellbeing as they often felt burdened by it, lacking in the appropriate knowledge for managing certain issues and they believed it took time away from academic work. However, the 21<sup>st</sup> century teacher must explicitly promote and develop student wellbeing in today's classrooms because the rising number of children and young people with emotional, mental, social, and behavioural disorders cannot be ignored. Teachers must promote wellbeing to ensure that they are helping to raise healthy children and young people who can participate in the future and have decreased risk of being disconnected from their community ([Durlak et al., 2011](#); [Kidger et al., 2009](#); [Martinez, 2016](#)). Yet [Schonert-Reichl \(2017\)](#) has identified there is still a mismatch between the teacher's job requirements and their personal and professional capabilities, resources, or needs. Many teachers have identified that their current role has placed them in situations where they feel underprepared, unconfident, and unsupported to manage student wellbeing in an effective manner ([Kidger et al., 2009](#); [Martinez, 2016](#); [Schonert-Reichl, 2017](#)). This highlights the importance for teachers to receive and engage in training and professional development. Kiger et al., (2017), [Poulou \(2017\)](#) and [Schonert-Reichl \(2017\)](#) have communicated that teachers need training and professional development in all stages of their careers, because it raises their confidence levels, develops their skills and abilities, increases their knowledge, and ultimately positively influences student wellbeing. When teachers are engaging in training and professional development, they will reflect, observe, and receive feedback on their own practice and this will encourage them to examine their personal and professional ideas, values, and beliefs through a critical lens ([Martinez, 2016](#); [Van Petegrem et al., 2017](#)). When teachers can reflect on their own practice, it becomes easier to see how they influence their students and student wellbeing ([Murray-Harvey & Slee, 2007](#); [Poulou, 2017](#); [Van Petegrem et al., 2017](#)).

Teachers have significant power in the classroom and educational setting to develop and promote student wellbeing. [Holfve-Sable \(2014\)](#) identified that teachers can act on low and negative student wellbeing by understanding their flow on effect to students and by creating a safe, supportive, and orderly learning setting that promotes good social relationships. Teachers can educate students to improve and manage their wellbeing by relieving stress, managing their anger, dealing with social interactions, forming strong adult-child relationships, and being involved in their own decision making ([Anderson & Graham, 2016](#); [Poulou, 2017](#)). Teaching strategies to promote student wellbeing include constructive feedback and supportive instructional communication ([Murray-Harvey, 2010](#)). Furthermore, [Durlak et al. \(2011\)](#) identified that it was likely that the school environment, teacher practices and expectations, and student-teacher relationships will contribute to developing student wellbeing. Additional research from van der Kaap-Deeder et al., (2017) emphasises that teachers must provide higher levels of autonomy to students so that they become more motivated in their learning. [Van Petegrem et al., \(2007\)](#) suggests that the best style of teaching to promote student wellbeing is dominate-cooperative. This type of teaching style is tolerant yet disciplinarian as it gives students structure with flexibility ([Van Petegrem et al., 2017](#)). [Holfve-Sable \(2014\)](#) reinforces the dominate-cooperative teaching style to improve student

wellbeing. This type of teacher creates a positive and stimulating environment that is fun, enthusiastic, mainly task-oriented, and considers the physical and emotional needs of individual students ([Van Petegrem et al., 2017](#)). [Van Petegrem et al., \(2007\)](#) and [Holfve-Sable \(2014\)](#) highlight the importance for current teachers to move away from the traditional authoritarian style of teaching, to ensure they are positively influencing student wellbeing in the classroom.

## Teacher – Student Relationship

Developing and maintaining meaningful relationships between teachers and students in the classroom is a significant component to fostering student wellbeing. Teachers have substantial responsibility in ensuring that these relationships are formed and then continue to be a source of support for their students. [Schonert-Reichl \(2017\)](#) identified that a teacher's own competence shapes the nature of the relationship they have with their students. [Poulou \(2017\)](#) adds to this by stating that it is teachers perceived emotional intelligence that shapes the relationship between student and teacher. But, as [Murray-Harvey and Slee \(2007\)](#) indicated, relationships are bidirectional, meaning that both teachers and students have a part to play in maintaining the relationship.

Teacher-student relationships affect student wellbeing as the daily closeness the two parties share affects whether their needs have been recognised and somewhat satisfied. [Anderson and Graham \(2016\)](#) has suggested that it is a vital human need to be recognised, and that it is inseparably bound with wellbeing. From the studies in this review, the relationship between teachers and students has been identified as being inseparable from student wellbeing. The study conducted by [Murray-Harvey and Slee \(2007\)](#) identified that when teacher-student relationships are supportive, students experience higher levels of wellbeing. Whereas, if they are in a stressful relationship, students experience lower levels of wellbeing. This emphasises the need for teachers to engage in supportive teacher-student relationships. [Anderson and Graham \(2016\)](#) suggested that teachers can be supportive through conversation and listening so that the students feel their unique voice is important and therefore can participate. [Murray-Harvey \(2010\)](#) reinforces the importance of communication in teacher-student relationships. [Van Petegrem et al., \(2007\)](#) suggest that for teachers to be a source of support in the relationship, they need to be understanding, cooperative, and tolerant, and are there to help students when help is needed. In addition to this, [Anderson and Graham \(2016\)](#) highlighted the importance of students being genuinely heard and listened to in teacher-student relationships to promote student wellbeing. [Murray-Harvey \(2010\)](#) identified that females reported that their relationship with a teacher is more supportive than what males reported. Furthermore, [Murray-Harvey and Slee \(2007\)](#) established that students feel primary school teachers are more supportive than secondary school teachers. Teachers need to be aware of this, and ensure that they are supporting every child in their classroom. Supportive teacher-student relationships should not be seen as additive value to the quality of wellbeing, but as an essential part of achieving student success ([Murray-Harvey, 2010](#)).

Having supportive teacher-student relationships has numerous positive outcomes for students learning and need

satisfaction. It has been found in many studies in this review that when teacher-student relationships are supportive, students are more motivated, engaged and persistent to learn, which increases academic performance (Murray-Harvey & Slee, 2007; Schonert-Reichl, 2017; van der Kaap-Deeder et al., 2017). Murray-Harvey and Slee (2007) report that when students are in supportive teacher-student relationships they are less likely to report symptoms such as apathy, depression or aggression. They also suggest that supportive relationships reduce victimisation and bullying of students. Furthermore, when teachers and students share a supportive relationship, students are less likely to engage in risky behaviours (Holfve-Sabel, 2014; Poulou, 2017). From this, it is hoped that student emotional, mental, social, and behavioural disorders will decrease. Building supportive, and reducing stressful, teacher-student relationships is key for teachers in ensuring they are developing and fostering student wellbeing.

## Conclusion

This literature review has identified the significant need for educational settings to explicitly promote and develop student wellbeing. The review has found that students with higher wellbeing tend to have greater social and emotional competence and greater academic achievement. The role teachers play in influencing student wellbeing is incontestable. Teachers must create a safe, supportive, and respectful classroom, where the students are genuinely being listened to. Teachers need to understand that their own wellbeing does have a flow-on effect to their students. Therefore, teachers must also develop their own wellbeing competence to perform their job effectively. Teachers should develop a dominate-cooperative teaching style that allows freedom yet discipline when students need it. Teachers also need to consistently engage in training and personal development to gain the knowledge, skills, and competencies to effectively manage and develop student wellbeing in the classroom. Teachers, and students, need to be mindful of the relationships and level of connectedness they share. In addition, they need to engage in a supportive relationship to foster higher levels of student wellbeing. In summary, it is the role of the teacher that has significant influence on promoting and developing student wellbeing in an educational setting that is crucial for them to be productive citizens.

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